Falling into Theory

CONFLICTING VIEWS ON READING LITERATURE

DAVID H. RICHTER
Queens College and the City University of New York Graduate Center

With a Foreword by
Gerald Graff

BEDFORD/ST. MARTIN'S
Boston  •  New York
NOTES


10. Peabody, as reprinted in Hawthorne, ed. Crowley, p. 66.
14. Henry F. Chorley, in a review of The Blithedale Romance, Atheneum, 10 (July 1852), pp. 741–43, as reprinted in Hawthorne, ed. Crowley, p. 247 (the remark is typical); Kirkland, p. 131.
16. Kirkland, p. 221. Most of Hawthorne’s reviewers make this point in one way or another.
19. These characterizations of Melville are drawn from reviews by Edgar Allan Poe, Anne W. Abbott, Rufus Griswold, Henry Tuckerman, E. P. Whipple, R. H. Stoddard, Samuel W. S. Dutton, Evert Duyckinck, Charles Wilkins Webber, Amory Dwight Mayo, and George Loring. All were reprinted in Hawthorne, ed. Crowley.
20. These characterizations of Melville came from reviews in the Spectator, the Boston Post, the Literary World, the Democratic Review, the London Monthly Magazine, the Southern Quarterly, the Athenaeum, the Atlantic Monthly, the Atlantic, the Athenaeum, Today, and Peterson’s Magazine, as cited by Hugh Hetherington, “Early Reviews of Moby-Dick,” in Moby-Dick Centennial Essays, ed. T. E. Hallow and S. Mansfield (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1953), pp. 89–122.
21. Though critics used the terms “original” and “deep” to praise both writers, Hawthorne’s reviewers liked to characterize him as “gentle,” “tasteful,” “quiet,” “delicate,” “subtle,” “graceful,” and “elegant,” while Melville’s admirers constantly used words such as “racy,” “wild,” “extravagant,” “brilliant,” “eccentric,” “outrageous,” and “thrilling.”

BARBARA HERRNSTEIN SMITH

Barbara Herrnstein Smith is a scholar of aesthetics, literary theory, and linguistic theory. Born in New York City, Smith took her B.A. (1954), M.A. (1955), and Ph.D. (1965) in English and American literature at Brandeis University in Massachusetts. She has been an instructor at the Sanz School of Languages in Washington, D.C. (1956–1957), and a member of the literature faculty at Bennington College (1962–1974). She has also been a professor at the University of Pennsylvania (1974–1987), where she was named director of the Center for the Study of Art and Symbolic Behavior in 1979 and University Professor of English and Communications in 1980. Smith has been a fellow of (1970–1971) and a consultant for (1974) the National Endowment of the Humanities as well as a Guggenheim fellow (1977–1978) and a chair of the Modern Language Association (1987–1988). Currently she is a professor at Duke University in a department that includes other renowned literary theorists, such as Janice Raynor and Fredric Jameson. Most of Smith’s publications have been academic articles. Her books include Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End, which won the Christian Gauss Award and the Explicator Award for 1968, On the Margins of Discourse: The Relation of Literature to Language (1978), Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory (1988), and The Politics of Liberal Education (coedited with Darryl Gless, 1991). Her most recent book is Belief and Resistance: The Dynamics of Contemporary Intellectual Controversy (1997). The following selection is part of an excerpt from Contingencies of Value that appeared in Critical Inquiry 10 (1983).

Contingencies of Value

When we consider the cultural re-production of value on a larger time scale, the model of evaluative dynamics outlined above suggests that the “survival” or “endurance” of a text—and, it may be, its achievement of high canonical status not only as a “work of literature” but as a “classic”—is the product neither of the objectively (in the Marxist sense) conspiratorial force of establishment institutions nor of the continuous appreciation of the timeless virtues of a fixed object by succeeding generations of isolated readers, but, rather, of a series of continuous interactions among a variably constituted object, emergent
ndlions, and mechanisms of cultural selection and transmission. These in-
ructions are, in certain respects, analogous to those by virtue of which bi-
gorical species evolve and survive and also analogous to those through which
tistic choices evolve and are found fit or fitting by the individual artist. The
eration of these cultural-historical dynamics may be briefly indicated here
quite general terms.

At a given time and under the contemporary conditions of available ma-
als, technology, and techniques, a particular object—let us say a verbal arti-
c or text—may perform certain desired/able functions quite well for some
of subjects. It will do so by virtue of certain of its "properties" as they have
en specifically constituted—framed, foregrounded, and configured—by
ese subjects under those conditions and in accord with their particular
ted, interests, and resources—and also perhaps largely as pre-figured by the
ist who, as described earlier, in the very process of producing the work and
inuously evaluating its fitness and adjusting it accordingly, will have mul-
ly and variably constituted it. Two points implied by this description need
phasis here. One is that the value of a work—that is, its effectiveness in
orming desired/able functions for some set of subjects—is not indepen-
dent of authorial design, labor, and skill. The second, however, is that what
y be spoken of as the "properties" of the work—its "structure," "features,"
ilities," and, of course, its "meanings"—are not fixed, given, or inherent in
work "itself" but are at every point the variable products of some subject's
action with it. (It is thus never "the same Homer"). To the extent that any
pect of a work is recurrently constituted in similar ways by various subjects
arious times, it will be because the subjects who do the constituting, includ-
g the author, are themselves similar, not only in being human creatures and in
pying a particular universe that may be, for them, in many respects recur-
ent or relatively continuous and stable, but also in inheriting from one an-
other, through mechanisms of cultural transmission, certain ways of interact-
g with that universe, including certain ways of interacting with texts and
orks of literature.

An object or artifact that performs certain desired/able functions particu-
larly well at a given time for some community of subjects, being perhaps not
ly "fit" but exemplary—that is, "the best of its kind"—under those condi-
tions, will have an immediate survival advantage; for, relative to (or in competi-
tion with) other comparable objects or artifacts available at that time, it will
not only be better protected from physical deterioration but will also be more
quently used or widely exhibited and, if it is a text or verbal artifact, more
quently read or recited, copied or reprinted, translated, imitated, cited, and
mmented upon—in short, culturally re-produced—and thus will be more
adly available to perform those or other functions for other subjects at a
squent time.

Two possible trajectories ensue:

1. If, on the one hand, under the changing and emergent conditions of that
sequent time, the functions for which the text was earlier valued are no
ger desired/able or if, in competition with comparable works (including,
w, those newly produced and newly available materials and techniques), it
 longer performs those original functions particularly well, it will, accord-

ingly, be less well maintained and less frequently cited and recited so that its
visibility as well as interest will fade, and it will survive, if at all, simply as a
physical relic. It may, of course, be subsequently valued specifically as a relic
(for its archeological or "historical" interest), in which case it will be per-
forming desired/able functions and pursue the trajectory described below. It may
also be subsequently "rediscovered" as an "unjustly neglected masterpiece,"
either when the functions it had originally performed are again desired/able
or, what is more likely, when different from its properties and possible functions
become foregrounded by a new set of subjects with emergent interests and
purposes.

2. If, on the other hand, under changing conditions and in competition
with newly produced and other re-produced works, it continues to perform
some desired/able functions particularly well, even if not the same ones for
which it was initially valued (and, accordingly, by virtue of other newly fore-
grounded or differently framed or configured properties—including, once
again, emergent "meanings"), it will continue to be cited and recited, continue
to be visible and available to succeeding generations of subjects, and thus con-
tinue to be culturally re-produced. A work that has in this way survived for
some time can always move into a trajectory of extinction through the sudden
emergency or gradual conjunction of unfavorable conditions of the kind de-
scribed above under (1). There are, however, a number of reasons why, once it
has achieved canonical status, it will be more secure from that risk.

First, when the value of a work is seen as unquestionable, those of its fea-
tures that would, in a noncanonical work, be found alienating—for example,
technically crude, philosophically naive, or narrowly topical—will be glazed
over or backgrounded. In particular, features that conflict intolerably with the
interests and ideologies of subsequent subjects (and, in the West, with those
generally benign "humanistic" values for which canonical works are commonly cel-
brated)—for example, incidents or sentiments of brutality, bigotry, and racial,
sexuality, or national chauvinism—will be repressed or rationalized, and there
will be a tendency among humanistic scholars and academic critics to "save the
text" by transferring the locus of its interest to more formal or structural features
and/or allegorizing its potentially alienating ideology to some more general
("universal") level where it becomes more tolerable and also more readily inter-
pretable in terms of contemporary ideologies. Thus we make texts timeless by
suppressing their temporality. (It may be added that to those scholars and critics
for whom those features are not only palatable but for whom the value of the
canonical works consists precisely in their "embodiment" and "preserving" such
"traditional values," the transfer of the locus of value to formal properties will be
seen as a descent into formalism and "aestheticism," and the tendency to al-
egorize it too generally or to interpret it too readily in terms of "modern values"
will be seen not as saving the text but as betraying it.)

Second, in addition to whatever various and perhaps continuously differ-
ing functions a work performs for succeeding generations of individual sub-
jects, it will also begin to perform certain characteristic cultural functions by
virtue of the very fact that it has endured—that is, the functions of a canonical

"glazed over: explained away."
work as such—and will be valued and preserved accordingly: as a witness to lost innocence, former glory, and/or apparently persistent communal interests and “values” and thus a banner of communal identity; as a reservoir of images, archetypes, and topoi—characters and episodes, passages and verbal tags—repeatedly invoked and recurrently applied to new situations and circumstances; and as a stylistic and generic exemplar that will energize the production of subsequent works and texts (upon which the latter will be modeled and by which, as a normative “touchstone,” they will be measured). In these ways, the canonical work begins increasingly not merely to survive within but to shape and create the culture in which its value is produced and transmitted and, for that very reason, to perpetuate the conditions of its own flourishing. Nothing endures like endurance.

To the extent that we develop within and are formed by a culture that is itself constituted in part by canonical texts, it is not surprising that those texts seem, as Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it, to "speak" to us "directly" and even "specially":

The classical is what is preserved precisely because it signifies and interprets itself; that is, that which speaks in such a way that it is not a statement about what is past, as mere testimony to something that needs to be interpreted, but says something to the present as if it were said specially to us. . . . This is just what the word “classical” means, that the duration of the power of a work to speak directly is fundamentally unlimited.  

It is hardly, however, as Gadamer implies here, because such texts are uniquely self-mediated or unmediated and hence not needful of interpretation but, rather, because they have already been so thoroughly mediated—evaluated as well as interpreted—for us by the very culture and cultural institutions through which they have been preserved and by which we ourselves have been formed.

What is commonly referred to as "the test of time" (Gadamer, for example, characterizes the "classical" as a "notable mode of being historical," that historical process of preservation that through the constant proving of itself sets before us something that is true) is not, as the figure implies, an impersonal and impartial mechanism: for the cultural institutions through which it operates (schools, libraries, theaters, museums, publishing and printing houses, editorial boards, prize-awarding commissions, state censor, etc.) are, of course, all managed by persons (who, by definition, are those with cultural power and commonly other forms of power as well), and, since the texts that are selected and preserved by "time" will always tend to be those which "fit" (and, indeed, have often been designed to fit) their characteristic needs, interests, resources, and purposes, that testing mechanism has its own built-in partialities accumulated in and thus intensified by time. For example, the characteristic resources of the culturally dominant members of a community include access to specific training and the opportunity and occasion to develop not only competence in a large number of cultural codes but also a large number of diverse (or "cosmopolitan") interests. The works that are differentially reproduced, therefore, will often be those that gratify the exercise of such competencies and engage interests of that kind: specifically, works that are structurally complex and, in the technical sense, information-rich—and which, by virtue of those very qualities, are especially amenable to multiple reconfiguration, more likely to enter into relation with the emergent interests of various subjects, and thus more readily adaptable to emergent conditions. Also, as is often remarked, since those with cultural power tend to be members of socially, economically, and politically established classes (or to serve them and identify their own interests with theirs), the texts that survive will tend to be those that appear to reflect and reinforce establishment ideologies. However, much canonical works may be seen to "question" secular vanities such as wealth, social position, and political power, "remind" their readers of more elevated values and virtues, and oblige them to "confront" such hard truths and harsh realities as their own mortality and the hidden grieves of obscure people, they would not be found to please long and well if they were seen to undercut establishment interests radically or to subvert the ideologies that support them effectively. (Construing them to the latter ends, of course, is one of the characteristic ways in which those with antiestablishment interests participate in the cultural re-production of canonical texts and thus in their endurance as well.)

It is clear that the needs, interests, and purposes of culturally and otherwise dominant members of a community do not exclusively or totally determine which works survive. The antiquity and longevity of domestic proverbs, popular tales, children's verbal games, and the entire phenomenon of what we call "folklore," which occurs through the same or corresponding mechanisms of cultural selection and re-production as those described above specifically for "texts," demonstrate that the "endurance" of a verbal artifact (if not its achievement of academic canonical status as a "work of literature"—many folkloric works do, however, perform all the functions described above as characteristic of canonical works as such) may be more or less independent of institutions controlled by those with political power. Moreover, the interests and purposes of the latter must always operate in interaction with non- or antiestablishment interests and purposes as well as with various other contingencies and "accidents of time" over which they have limited, if any, control, from the burning of libraries to political and social revolutions, religious iconoclasm, and shifts of dominance among entire languages and cultures.

As the preceding discussion suggests, the value of a literary work is continuously produced and re-produced by the very acts of implicit and explicit evaluation that are frequently invoked as "reflecting" its value and therefore as being evidence of it. In other words, what are commonly taken to be the signs of literary value are, in effect, also its springs. The endurance of a classic canonical author such as Homer, then, owes not to the alleged transcultural or universal value of his works but, on the contrary, to the continuity of their circulation in a particular culture. Repeatedly cited and recited, translated, taught and imitated, and thoroughly enmeshed in the network of intertextuality that continuously constitutes the high culture of the orthodoxy educated population of the West (and the Western-educated population of the rest of the world), that highly variable entity we refer to as "Homer" recurrently enters our experience in relation to a large number and variety of our interests and thus can perform a large number of various functions for us and
biously has performed them for many of us over a good bit of the history of our culture. It is well to recall, however, that there are many people in the world who are not—or are not yet, or choose not to be—among the orthodoxy educated population of the West: people who do not encounter Western ideas at all or who encounter them under cultural and institutional conditions very different from those of American and European college professors and their students. The fact that Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare do not figure significantly in the personal economies of these people, do not perform individual or social functions that gratify their interests, do not have value for them, right properly be taken as qualifying the claims of transcendent universal value made for such works. As we know, however, it is routinely taken instead as evidence or confirmation of the cultural deficiency—or, more piously, deprivation—of such people. The fact that other verbal artifacts (not necessarily “works of literature” or even “texts”) and other objects and events (not necessarily “works of art” or even artifacts) have performed and do perform to them the various functions that Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare perform to us and, moreover, that the possibility of performing the totality of such functions is always distributed over the totality of texts, artifacts, objects, and events—a possibility continuously realized and thus a value continuously appreciated—commonly cannot be grasped or acknowledged by the custodians of the Western canon.

NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 255.
3. Structural complexity and information-riche are, of course, subject-relative as qualities and also experientially subject-variable: that is, we apparently differ individually our tolerance for complexity in various sensory/perceptual modes and in our competence.

Lillian S. Robinson

Lillian S. Robinson was born in New York City in 1941 and educated at Brown, New York University, and Columbia, where she received her Ph.D. in comparative literature in 1974. Her dissertation, Monstrous Regiment: The Lady Knight in Sixteenth-Century Epic, was published in 1985. Robinson taught American studies and women's studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo, but since the late 70s she has been an academic vagabond, teaching as visiting professor for a semester at colleges like Albright, Scripps, San Diego State, the University of Hawaii, Rice University, and the University of Texas, and eking out a living on fellowships, writing and lecture fees, and unemployment insurance and food stamps in the meantime. Robinson's rootlessness has a great deal to do with the fact that her critical social critique is her life, not merely her ideology; she wants not just to study

the world but to change it. Robinson was jailed for her protest activities during the 1960s. As her radicalism moved into feminist themes, she became outraged that women's studies tended to leave out poor women, minority women, an class women and to concentrate on more genteel modes of oppression. She scandalized the fact that academic feminist theory had become an affair with a quick route to the top at the same time that women's income remained that of men's. Her early essays, collected in Sex, Class, and Culture (that the preference for masculine values and male authors over feminine is only one of a series of preordained imbalances in Western society working-class texts and "lowbrow" forms of entertainment are marginalized by those women. Robinson's more recent work has appeared in Scholarship: Kindling in the Groves of Academe (1985) and In the Mouth (1992). She is also the author of a mystery novel, Murder in the Des, Greenville, North Carolina. The following essay was originally put Studies in Women's Literature (1983).

Treason Our Text

Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon

Successful plots have often had gunpowder in them. Feminists have gone so far as to take treason to the canon as our text.1

The lofty seat of canonized bards (Polio)

As with many other restrictive institutions, we are ha we come into conflict with it; the elements of the literary sorbed by the apprentice scholar and critic in the norm literature, without anyone's ever seeming to incum peal, were any necessary, would be to the other manner established standards of judgment and of taste. Not presented as rigid and immutable—far from it, for le are full of wry references to a benighted though hardy the metaphysical poets were insufficiently appreciate the most modern poet recognized in American li knowledge of a subjective dimension, sometimes, as to the category of taste. Sweeping modifications occur because of changes in collective sensibility, and elevations from "minor" to "major" status lend ful critical promotion, which is to say, demonstrat does meet generally accepted criteria of excellence.

The results, moreover, are nowhere codified: a single place, nor are they absolutely uniform. In
11. A magazine editor will declare that Kafka’s prose has “the air of the cleanliness of a child who takes care of himself” (see Wagenbach, Franz Kafka, 82).

12. “The Great Swimmer” is undoubtedly one of the most Beckett-like of Kafka’s texts: I have to well admit that I am in my own country and that, in spite of all my efforts, I don’t understand a word of the language that you are speaking.”

Canon-Formation, Literary History, and the Afro-American Tradition

From the Seen to the Told

The Western critical tradition has a canning, as the Western literary tradition does. I once thought it our most important gesture to master the canon of criticism, to innovate and apply it; but now believe that it must turn to the black tradition itself to develop theories of criticism indigenous to our literature. Alice Walker’s revision of Rebecca Cox Jackson’s parable of white interpretation (written in 1836) makes this point most telling. Jackson, a Shaker eldress and black visionary, claimed like John Jee to have been taught to read by the Lord. She writes in her autobiography that she dreamed a white man came to her house to teach her how to interpret and understand the word of God, now that God had taught her to read:

A white man took me by my right hand and led me on the north side of the room, where sat a square table. On it lay a book open. And he said to me, "Thou shall be instructed in this book, from Genesis to Revelations." And then he took me on the west side, where stood a table. And it looked like the first. And said, "Yes, thou shall be instructed from the beginning of creation to the end of time." And then he took me on the east side of the room also, where stood a table and book like the two first, and said, "I will instruct thee—yes, thou shall be instructed from the beginning of all things to the end of all things. Yes, thou shall be well instructed. I will instruct." And then I awoke, and I saw him as plain as I did in my dream. And after that he taught me daily. And when I would be reading and come to a hard word, I would see him standing by my side and he would teach me the word right. And often, when I would be in meditation and looking into things which was hard to understand, I would find him by me, teaching and giving me understanding. And oh, his labor and care which he had with me often caused me to weep bitterly, when I would see my great ignorance and the great trouble he had to make me understand eternal things. For I was so buried in the depth of the tradition of my forefathers, that it did seem as if I could never be dug up.

In response to Jackson’s relation of interpretive indention to a “white man,” Walker, in The Color Purple, records an exchange between Celie and Shug about turning away from “the old white man” which soon turns into a conversation about the elimination of “man” as a mediator between a woman and “everything”:

Still, it is like Shug say, you have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a’ tall.

Man corrupt everything, say Shug. He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain’t. When ever you try to pray, and man plot himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug.

Celi and Shug’s omnipresent “man,” of course, echoes the black tradition’s synecdoche for the white power structure, “the man.”
For non-Western, so-called noncanonical critics, getting the “man off your back” means using the most sophisticated critical theories and methods available to reappropriate and redefine our own “colonial” discourses. We use these theories and methods insofar as they are relevant to the study of our own literatures. The danger in doing so, however, is best put by An- report on what he calls “the Naipaul fallacy”:

It is not necessary to show that African literature is fundamentally the same as European literature in order to show that it can be treated with the same tools... nor should we endorse a more sinister line... the postcolonial legacy which requires us to show that African literature is worthy of study precisely (but only) because it is fundamentally the same as European literature.

e must not, Appiah concludes, ask “the reader to understand Africa by em-ding it in European culture” (p. 146).

As Tait concludes, where is the black critical theory as great as this greatest black art? Our criticism is destined merely to be derivative, to be a pale shadow of the white master’s critical discourse, until we become confident enough to speak in our own black languages as we theorize about the black critical endeavor.

We must redefine “theory” itself from within our own black cultures, refusing to grant the racist premise that theory is something that white people do, so that we are doomed to imitate our white colleagues, like reverse black minstrel critics done up in whiteface. We are all heirs to critical theory, but we black critics are heirs as well to the black vernacular tradition. Our task now is to invent and employ our own critical theory, to assume our own propositions, and to stand within the academy as politically responsible and responsive parts of a social and cultural African American whole. Again, Soyinka’s words about our relation to the black tradition are relevant here:

That world which is so conveniently traduced by Apartheid thought is of course that which I so wholeheartedly embrace—and this is my choice among several options—the significance of my presence here. It is a world that nourishes my being, one which is so self-sufficient, so replete in all aspects of its productivity, so confident in itself and in its destiny that it experiences no fear in reaching out to others and in responding to the reach of others. It is the heartstone of our creative existence. It constitutes the prism of our world perception and this means that our sign need not be and has never been permanently turned inward. If it were, we could not so easily understand the enemy on our doorstep, nor understand how to obtain the means to disarm it. When this society which is Apartheid South Africa indulges from time to time in appeals to the outside world that it represents the last bastion of civilization against the hordes of barbarism from its North, we can even afford an indulgent smile. It is sufficient, imagines this state, to raise the specter of a few renegade African leaders, psychopaths and robber barons whom we ourselves are victims of—whom we denounce before the world and overthrow when we are able—this Apartheid society insists to the world that its picture of the future is the reality that only its policies can erase. This is a continent which only destroys, it proclaims, it is peopled by a race which has never contributed anything positive to the world’s pool of knowledge. A vacuum, that will suck into its insatiable jaws the entire fruits of centuries of European civilization, then spew out the resulting mush with contempt. How strange that a society which claims to represent this endangered face of progress should itself be locked in centuries-old
fantasies, blithely unaware of, or indifferent to the fact that it is the last, institutionally functioning product of archaic articles of faith in Euro-Judaic thought. (pp. 11-12)

As deconstruction and other poststructuralisms, or even an aracial Marxism and other "articles of faith in Euro-Judaic thought," exhaust themselves in a self-willed racial never-never-land in which we see no true reflections of our black faces and hear no echoes of our black voices, let us—at long last—master the canon of critical traditions and languages of Africa and Afro-America. Even as we continue to reach out to others in the critical canon, let us be confident in our own black traditions and in their compelling strength to sustain systems of critical thought that are as yet dormant and unexplicated. We must, in the truest sense, turn inward even as we turn outward to redefine every institution in this profession—the English Institute, the MLA, the School of Criticism—in our own images. We must not succumb, as did Alexander Crummell, to the tragic lure of white power, the mistake of accepting the empowering language of white critical theory as "universal" or as our own language, the mistake of confusing the enabling mask of theory with our own black faces. Each of us has, in some literal or figurative manner, boarded a ship and sailed to a metaphorical Cambridge, seeking to master the master's tools, and to outwit this racist master by compensating for a supposed lack. In my own instance, being quite literal-minded, I booked passage some fourteen years ago on the QE III! And much of my early work reflects my desire to outwit the master by trying to speak his language as fluently as he. Now, we must, at last, don the empowering mask of blackness and take that talk, the language of black difference. While it is true that we must, as Du Bois said so long ago, "know and test the power of the cabalistic letters of the white man," we must also know and test the dark secrets of a black and hermetic discursive universe that awaits its disclosure through the black arts of interpretation. For he future of theory and of the literary enterprise in general, in the remainder of this century, is black, indeed.

How does this matter of the black canon of criticism affect our attempts to define canon(s) of black literature? I believe, first of all, that until we free ourselves of the notion that we are "just Americans," as Ellison might put it, and that what is good and proper for Americanists is good and proper for Afro-Americanists, we shall remain indentured servants to white masters, female and male, and to the Western tradition, yielding the most fundamental right that any tradition possesses, and that is the right to define itself, its own terms or order, its very own presuppositions. If we recall the etymology of the word "theory" from the Greek theorēō, we can understand why the production of black text-specific theory is essential to our attempts to form black canons: heorēō, as Wlad Godzich points out in his introduction to Paul de Man's *The Resistance to Theory,* "is a public, institutional act of certification which assumes he authority to 'effect the passage from the seen to the told'; and provides the basis for public discourse. Theory, then, is—like rhetoric—a form of cognition modeled upon (public) utterance rather than upon (private) perception."

When we mindlessly borrow another tradition's theory, we undermine this passage from the seen to the told—from what we see to how we tell it—this basis for our own black public discourse, this relation between cognition and utterance.

Lord knows that this relationship between the seen and the told—that gap of difference between what we see among and for ourselves and what we choose to tell in (a white, or integrated) public discourse—has been remarkably complex in our tradition, especially in attempts to define the canon of black literature at any given time.

Curiously enough, the very first evidence of the idea of the "canon" in relation to the Afro-American literary tradition occurs in 1849, in a speech delivered by Theodore Parker. Parker was a theologian, a Unitarian clergyman, and a publicist for ideas; Perry Miller described him as "the man who next only to Emerson... was to give shape and meaning to the Transcendental movement in America." In a speech on "The Mercantile Classes" delivered in 1846, Parker had lamented the sad state of "American" letters:

> Literature, science, and art are mainly in [poor men's] hands, yet are controlled by the prevalent spirit of the nation. . . . In England, the national literature favors the church, the crown, the nobility, the prevailing class. Another literature is rising, but is not yet national, still less.canonized. We have no American literature which is permanent. Our scholarly books are only an imitation of a foreign type; they do not reflect our morals, manners, politics, or religion, not even our rivers, mountains, sky. They have not the smell of our ground in their breath.

Parker, to say the least, was not especially pleased with American letters and their identity with the English tradition. Did he find any evidence of a truly American discourse?

The real American literature is found only in newspapers and speeches, perhaps in some novel, hot, passionate, but poor and extemporaneous. That is our national literature. Does that favor man—represent man? Certainly not. All is the reflection of this most powerful class. The truths that are told are for them, and the lies. Therein the prevailing sentiment is getting into the form of thoughts.

Parker's analysis, of course, is "proto-Marxian," embodying as it does the reflection-theory of base and superstructure. It is the occasional literature, "poor and extemporaneous," wherein "American" literature dwells.

Three years later, in his major oration on "The American Scholar," Parker at last found an entirely original genre of American literature:

Yet, there is one portion of our permanent literature, if literature it may be called, which is wholly indigenous and original. The lives of the early martyrs and confessors are purely Christian, so are the legends of saints and other pious men; there was nothing like this in the Hebrew or heathen literature, cause and occasion were alike wanting for it. So we have one series of literary productions that could be written by none but Americans, and only here; I mean the Lives of Fugitive Slaves. But as these are not the work of the men of superior culture they hardly help to pay the scholar's debt. Yet all the original romance of Americans is in them, not in the white man's novel.
Parker was right about the originality, the peculiarly American quality, of the slave narratives. But he was wrong about their inherent inability to "pay the scholar's debt"; scholars had only to learn to rent the narratives for their debt to be paid in full, indeed many times over. As Charles Sumner said in 1852, the fugitive slaves and their narratives "are among the heroes of our age. Romance has no storms of more thrilling interest than theirs. Classical antiquity has preserved no examples of adventuous trial more worthy of renown." Parker's and Sumner's views reveal that the popularity of the narratives in antebellum America most certainly did not reflect any sort of common critical agreement about their nature and status as art. Still, the implications of these observations for black canon-formation would take three-quarters of a century to be realized. The first attempt to define a black canon that I have is that by Armand Lanusse, who edited Les Citadins, an anthology of black French verse published at New Orleans in 1845—the first black anthology, I believe, ever published. Lanusse's "Introduction" is a defense of poetry as an enterprise for black people, in their larger efforts to defend the race against "the spiteful and calumnious arrows shot at us," at a target defined as the collective black intellect (p. xxviii). Despite this stated political intention, these poems imitate the styles and themes of the French Romantics and never engage directly the social and political experience of black Creoles in New Orleans in the 1840s. Les Citadins argues for a political effect—that is, the end of racism—by publishing apolitical poems, poems which share as their silent second texts the poetry written by Frenchmen three thousand miles away. We are like the French—so, treat us like Frenchmen. An apolitical art was being put to uses most political.

Four years later, in 1849, William G. Allen published an anthology in which he canonized Phillis Wheatley and George Moses Horton. Like Lanusse, Allen sought to refute intellectual racism by the act of canon-formation. "The African's called inferior," he writes, "but what race has ever displayed intellect more exquisitely, or character more sublime?" (p. 3). Pointing to the achievements of Tushkin, Placido, and Augustin, as the great African tradition to which Afro-Americans are heir, Allen claims Wheatley and Horton as the exemplars of this tradition, Horton being "decidedly the superior genius," no doubt because of his explicitly racial themes, a judgment quite unlike that which propelled Armand Lanusse into canon-formation. As Allen puts it:

> Who will now say that the African is incapable of attaining to intellectual or moral greatness? What he now is, degrading circumstances have made him. Past clearly evince The African is strong, tough and hardy. Hundreds of years of oppression have not subdued his spirit, and though Church and State have combined to enslave and degrade him, in spite of them all, he is increasing in strength and power, and in the respect of the entire world. (p. 7)

Here, then, we see the two poles of black canon-formation, established firmly by 1849: is "black" poetry racial in theme, or is black poetry any sort of poetry written by black people? This quandary has been at play in the tradition ever since..."}

"In the following section, here omitted, Gates analyzes three anthologies of African American literature published in the 1920s.

I have been thinking about these strains in black canon-formation because a group of us are editing still another anthology, which will constitute still another attempt at canon-formation.

W. W. Norton will be publishing the Norton Anthology of Afro-American Literature. The editing of this anthology has been a great dream of mine for a long time. I am very excited about this project. I think that I am most excited about the fact that we will have at our disposal the means to edit an anthology which will define a canon of Afro-American literature for instructors and students at any institution which desires to teach a course in Afro-American literature. Once our anthology is published, no one will ever again be able to use the unavailability of black texts as an excuse not to teach our literature. A well-marketeted anthology—particularly a Norton anthology—functions in the academy to create a tradition, as well as to define and preserve it. A Norton anthology opens up a literary tradition as simply as opening the cover of a carefully edited and ample book.

I am not unaware of the politics and ironies of canon-formation. The canon that we define will be "our" canon, one possible set of selections among several possible sets of selections. In part to be as eclectic and as democratically "representative" as possible, most other editors of black anthologies have tried to include as many authors and selections (especially excerpts) as possible, in order to preserve "and 'resurrect' the tradition. I call this the Sears Roebuck approach, the "dream book" of black literature.

We have all benefited from this approach. Indeed, many of our authors have only managed to survive because an enterprising editor was determined to marshall as much evidence as she or he could to show that the black literary tradition existed. While we must be deeply appreciative of that approach and its results, our task will be a different one. One task will be to bring together the 'essential' texts of the canon, the 'crucially central' authors, those whom we feel to be indispensable to an understanding of the shape, and shaping, of the tradition. A canon is the essence of the tradition: the connection between the texts of the canon reveals the tradition's inherent, or veiled, logic, its internal rationale. None of us are naive enough to believe that "the canonical" is self-evident, absolute, or natural. Scholars make canons. Keenly aware of this—and quite frankly, aware of my own biases—I have attempted to bring together as period editors a group of scholar-critics, each of whom combines great expertise in her or his period with her or his own approach to the teaching and analyzing of Afro-American literature. I have attempted, in other words, to bring together scholars whose notions of the black canon might not necessarily agree with my own, or with each other. I have tried to bring together a diverse array of ideological, methodological, and theoretical perspectives, so that we together might produce an anthology which most fully represents the various definitions of what it means to speak of the Afro-American literary tradition, and what it means to touch that tradition.

I can say that my own biases toward canon-formation are to stress the formal relationship that obtains among texts in the black tradition—relations of revision, echo, call and response, antiphony, what have you—and to stress the vernacular roots of the tradition, contra Alexander Crumell. Accordingly, let me add that our anthology will include a major innovation in
Anthology production. Because of the strong oral and vernacular base of so much of our literature, we shall include a cassette tape along with our anthology. This means that each period will include both the printed and spoken text of oral and musical selections of black vernacular culture: sermons, blues, spirituals, & B, poets reading their own “dialect” poems, speeches, and other performances. Imagine having Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday singing the blues, James Brown reading “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Sterling Brown reading “Ma Rainey,” James Weldon Johnson “The Creation,” C. L. Franklin “The Sermon of the Dry Bones,” Martin speaking “I Have a Dream,” Sonia Sanchez “Talking in Tongues”—the list of possibilities is endless, and exhilarating. So much of our literature seems dead on the page when compared to its performance. Incorporating performance and the black and human voice into our anthology, we will change fundamentally not only the way our literature is taught but the way in which any literary tradition is even conceived.

Notes


Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

"by would have guessed from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 1975 doctoral dissertation, published in 1980 as The Coherence of Gothic Conventions, that she was to be one of the founders of gay and lesbian studies in America or that her 1989 MLA talk on "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl" (published in 1991 in Critical Inquiry) would be singled out for attack by right-wing columnist Roger Kimball as a prime example of "tenured radicalism." Eve Sedgwick was born in Dayton, Ohio, and educated at Cornell and Yale Universities. Her strikingly original work on homosexual desire began from lectures she gave while teaching women's studies at Boston University. Sedgwick writes: "When I began work on Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (1986), I saw myself as working mainly in the context of feminist literary criticism and theory. By the time I published Epistemology of the Closet in 1990, it was unmistakably clear that lesbian/gay criticism was a going concern in its own right. I see my work as being strongly marked by a queer politics that is at once antiseapatist and antiassimilationist; by a methodology that draws on deconstruction among other techniques; and by a richer experimentation." A poet as well as a critic, Sedgwick has taught writing and literature at Hamilton College, Boston University, Amherst College, and Duke University; she is currently Distinguished Professor of English at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Her most recent books are Tendencies (1993), Fat Art, Thin Art (1994), Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction (1997), and A Dialogue on Love (1999). The following selection is from the "Introduction: Axiomatic" to Epistemology of the Closet.

From Epistemology of the Closet

Axiom 6: The relation of gay studies to debates on the literary canon is, and had best be, tortuous.

Early on in the work Epistemology of the Closet, in trying to settle on a literary text that would provide a first example for the kind of argument I meant the book to enable, I found myself circling around a text of 1891, a narrative that in spite of its relative brevity has proved a durable and potent centerpiece of gay male intertextuality and indeed has provided a durable and potent physical icon for gay male desire. It tells the story of a young Englishman famous for an extreme beauty of face and figure that seems to betray his aristocratic origin—an origin marked, however, also by mystery and class dissidence. If the gorgeous youth gives his name to the book and stamps his bodily image on it, the narrative is nonetheless more properly the story of a male triangle: a second, older man is tortured by a desire for the youth for which he can find no direct mode of expression, and a third man, emblem of savagery and the world, presides over the dispensation of discursive authority as the beautiful youth murders the tortured lover and is himself, in turn, by the novel's end ritually killed.

But maybe, I thought, one such text would offer an insufficient basis for cultural hypothesis. Might I pick two? It isn't yet commonplace to read Dorian Gray and Billy Budd by one another's light, but that can only be a testimony to the power of accepted English and American literary canons to insulate and deform the reading of politically important texts. In any gay male canon the two contemporaneous experimental works must be yoked together as overarching gateway texts of our modern period, and the conventionally obvious
fix, to pin down, and to control. Like a lepidopterist who misses the beauty
and magic of lulling, living flight in the appreciative act of preserving a
remarkable example of the species, in my effort to explain the preferences of the
Book-of-the-Month Club editors as a function of cultural events and ideologi-
cal assumptions I have no doubt failed to capture completely the distinct reson-
ance of the particular desires and fears endured with and through the body
that have wedded individual readers to their most treasured books.

Still, I have tried to remember that just as the editors I encountered in 1985
read amidst the overwhelming and contradictory welter of detail in impos-
sibly complex and embodied social lives, so too did the club's founder, Harry
Scherman, and his early colleagues, judges Henry Seidel Canby and Dorothy
Canfield Fisher. They encountered the books they eventually chose for the
membership in the context of particular friendships, the birth and death of
children, funerals, marriages, publishing feuds, and so on. The materials they
selected to create what later became known as middletown culture were chosen
not only because they were members of a new professional, literary elite
addressing the needs and worries of a new class, but also because those books
addressed them in highly concrete, deeply resonant ways as persons moving
through life in embodied form, that is, as bodies crisscrossed by innumerable,
nuance-stigmata, some highly visible and therefore traceable to past events
and earlier conditions, others invisible and undetectable with the clumsy tools
of perception and interpretation we have available to us.

NOTES
1. I tried to put this suspicion into words in an article written in 1985, "Interpretive
Communities and Variable Literacies."
2. I was an English major at Michigan State University from 1967 to 1971. The major
introductory courses at the time were "forms courses," which were designed to introduce stu-
dents to the key literary genres of poetry, drama, the novel, and the short story. What we
were taught in those courses were the techniques and methods of close reading and textual
exigency associated with the New Criticism. As Gerald Graff, Michael Warner, and John
Jullien have pointed out, the New Critics tended to conceptualize literature as a specialized
form of language use that called for, and therefore justified, elaborate, careful, and highly
technical strategies of reading.
3. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History."
4. See especially Bourdieu, Distinction. The reader will find as my arguments progress
that this book has been profoundly influenced by Bourdieu's work.
5. Proust, "On Reading."

ALAN PURVES

Telling Our Story about Teaching Literature

During the course of my forty years of teaching literature in schools and col-
leges, I have seen a great variety of students and I have read a great deal about
literary criticism and theory, looked at many textbooks (even written some),
and gathered a reputation of sorts.
Now I am a curmudgeon, and I take the liberty of speaking like a curmud-
geon. Recently, I have been both amused and irritated by the sorts of jargon
terms that go across the pages of the English Journal and other magazines that
afflict teachers of English. That dubious breed call researchers or experts
toss around terms like "reader response" (a good thing), "New Criticism" (a bad thing), "intertextuality" (good), "text-based" (bad), "envis,”
"multiculturalism" (good), "canon" (bad), "social construction of”
"good," and "teacher-centered" (bad). Many of this breed also spend their time
making teachers feel guilty for having students read books by dead white
males and having students write essays that are marked by good organization
and textual support for their claims about what they are reading. The re-
searchers and experts use terms and arguments that confuse many teachers
and denigrate parents who want to know why their little darlings are not
learning to read and why they are not reading the same literature the parents
did when they were in school.

I would like to tell the story of what I think most teachers of literature do. I
hope I will not resort to too much jargon. My wife accuses me of being jargon-
ridden all the time.

Basically and initially, we teachers do two things. First, we try to get stu-
dents to read stories, poems, plays, and novels that they probably would not
choose on their own but that readers over the years have found of value as
being good, serious, and well written and as allowing young people to learn
something of the complex heritage that is our hybrid culture. Second, we try to
get students to write and talk about the ideas raised in the heads of many edu-
cated people who have read and thought about those same works and to write
and talk in a disciplined way.

Born in 1931, Alan Purves was educated at Phillips Academy and Harvard
University. He received his Ph.D. in English from Columbia University in 1969. Purves's re-
search interests quickly moved from literature itself to cross-cultural questions about
how literature was taught and learned. His work became the basis for a ten-nation
study of pedagogical practices conducted by the International Association for the Eval-
Now, both these activities are probably best done in school, where there is some kind of pressure on students to do what they might not ordinarily do. Asking or obliging students to do what they would not otherwise do is not all that should go on, and the single-minded application of that kind of pressure probably narrow and shortsighted.

Ordinarily, people select works of literature to read (if they read — otherwise they will see a story live or on video — it really doesn’t matter) in order to have a private experience of the sheer pleasure of being engrossed in another world, the world of the Baby-Sitters Club, the world of Star Trek, or the world of Agatha Christie’s The Mousetrap. If they are lucky — and it does not happen often, as each of you probably knows — the experience will be so captivating that they will become absorbed in the book, performance, or film to the extent that they cannot put it down; they may even become totally unaware of their surroundings. And they take with them the memory of that experience. I say, “If they are lucky,” and challenge you to count the number of times this has happened to you. It is a rare and wonderful experience, which comes when it comes; I don’t think it can be forced, and I certainly don’t think it can be taught or has any place in school except by sheer good fortune.

If people talk about these experiences to anyone, it is primarily to refer to the possibility that others will share, might share, or have shared them. The experience is not an intellectual one as such, and the reading or viewing and the talk may not raise great issues and truths in the readers’ minds. The experience is all.

School changes that. It always has changed that. In school the experience of being engrossed in the world of the book, play, or film may be what we teachers would like to see happen, particularly as a result of our tender ministrations, but we know that the reason we have students read or view and discuss or write has little to do with pleasure. Our lesson plans and textbooks are apparatuses that focus on a different kind of audience and function for a different end. The kind of readers and viewers we hope to create are those who will work at the text or film and take pleasure in the intellectual play of working with it, and then will take this experience with them and play with other texts or images, getting pleasure not simply from the experience of reading and viewing but from the thinking and talking that go with school. We are in the business of training students in the discipline of reflection about literature. Let me give the following poem by Maxine Kumin as an example:

THE WOODLOT IN WINTER

To come among the hardwoods in a howling wind is to enter a long, empty house of many chambers whose doors fly open and slam shut scraping on dry lintels. Cupboards complain to their hinges and windows rise and fall, teeter and fall.

Oak here breaks its heart. Hickory drops its shagbark and the woman-smooth beech tree pushes nine legs through the floorboards.

Fat stones rub under the snow crust.
The rafters drink in their birds.
Only in the inglenook the ghost of a rabbit is having its throat cut.

Probably many students would not choose this poem. Nor would many teachers who were unfamiliar with New England and the woods in winter. But, if the poem was assigned, teachers and a good number of college-bound students would dutifully read it and work and play with it for the half hour or so that goes into reading it as an intellectual exercise. If anyone gets caught up in the poem, that is a bit of serendipity; it is not a necessary part of the program or the goal of instruction.

Students might begin by talking about what they have understood and what they have not. Some might ask about lintels; most would ask about an inglenook. If the poem was in a textbook, there would be a convenient note to help them over these low hurdles.

Students might also begin by saying that the poem is boring, they don’t get it, what’s he trying to say (to many students all authors are male), or they might simply sit like bumps on a log. There are many pedagogical techniques that teachers use to get students talking about a text. There might be a discussion of the woods in winter; there might be references to how in many poems Kumin seems to upset the cheerful view of nature; there might be comparisons with Frost, if the students have just read a poem like “Design” or “Out, Out”—

The point of the talk would be to get students to come to an interpretation of the poem. This involves a limited set of questions. What is Kumin saying? How are we supposed to respond to this poem? How is it organized? What words stand out? What does it say about people or life or your environment? Is it well written? How does the poet get you to respond the way you do? How is Kumin like Frost and other American poets? How does this poem reflect a woman’s perspective on the woods? All these and more are fair balls in the school literature game. To be silent and to persist in saying, “I don’t get it” or “So what?” is to strike out and lose. To talk about how one has had interesting experiences in the woods is to hit a foul ball. The focus should remain on the text and on the spaces between words in the text.

In the context of school, the literature student is one who reads the words of the poem carefully. From this careful reading, which plays with what is in between the words or the lines, that is, what is unsaid or hinted at, the student is then asked to come up with some sort of conclusion — a statement, an interpretation, a discussion of theme. The student is also expected to bridge the space between the text and what is known of the author or of the author’s time or culture, the space between the particular text and others that have been studied in class, and the space between the text and items from the student’s culture. In other words, the student is expected to situate the text.

The student may also be asked to deal with issues of morality both personal and public. In advanced classes, the student should go into niceties of style. Some may be encouraged to use art or another medium to compare and contrast with the poem. Then the class will move on to the next work — a short story by Shirley Jackson, another poem by Maxine Kumin, a film by Spike Lee — and the process will begin all over again.
This is what school literature is about and what it has been about. It’s not supposed to be fun; it’s supposed to be a mental discipline. Students are learning a disciplined way of reading, watching, or listening and a disciplined way of talking, writing, or composing, which teachers believe—or someone believes—will help them later in life. It is an intellectual discipline, like programming, like talking and writing about history, like talking and writing about science, mathematics, business, law, or medicine. Ours is primarily a discipline of letters and what is known as the humanities, a version of discourse about the arts and their relation to the human imagination. As I said earlier, we are training a habit of reflection and refraction about what one reads and the thoughts that the reading engenders. I use the words “reflection” and “refraction,” because it seems that when both things happen, the work and the reader can form a mirror to each other; they can also be lenses that change each other.

It is deliberate training to acquire a habit of mind that we think important, that has marked the educated reader since the Middle Ages. Reflection slows us down and takes us away from the immediate experience to a more thoughtful and disciplined way of talking with others about a piece of literature and by extension about our daily lives. This form of reflection has its roots in the reading, talking about, and ruminating on sacred texts, but the schools have secularized such reading and talking. What is being practiced in literature is practiced in the other arts, as well as in history and other subjects. Unlike scientific reading and discussion, the reading and discussion about literature are not exact; rather than provide correct answers, they provide tried and proven procedures that serve people who are going to deal with other kinds of information. They are the groundwork for law, for business, for participation in a world of information. They are centuries old and, I think, no less needed today as a part of the process of harnessing the mind.

That we keep on teaching literature for twelve years, regardless of how quickly students master the technique and the lingo, suggests that the accumulation of reading and discourse has a purpose other than simply learning a particular jargon and a way of talking. Teachers do it in the belief that it is important for students to have read and discussed a number of works. The purpose is to acquire a cumulative sense of something called literature. Literature comprises a number of individual specimens of types that society believes students should become familiar with. Just as we think it important to know birds from mammals and, within the category of mammals, dogs from cats from lions, so we think it important to know poems from plays and, within the category of plays, tragedy from comedy. We also believe it important for students to gain a sense of the national and the cultural spirit that manifests itself in literature. Finally, we believe it important for them to see the way a variety of pieces of literature touch on major human concerns, such as people’s dealing with nature.

So we devote part of our courses to genres, part to American or African American culture, and part to themes. As a result, we expect our students to talk about the content and form of Kumin’s poem, about how it relates to the genre of poetry and to verse that uses occasional rhyme and a tight meter as well as metaphor, about how it relates to American poetry and to women’s studies, and about how it relates to the broad theme of humanity’s ambivalent relation to nature.

In doing all this, we deal not with facts but with an age-old set of norms for talking about literature, norms that define the literature class both as a social institution and as today’s second period at Joseph Conrad High. The facts, the slogans and labels, do not tell the story of what we do, which is larger and older than any immediate, accidental, reductive, and simplistic expression or example of it. We strive to help students toward that larger and older perspective, to come to a particular understanding of themselves and their past, to enter that broader world that is defined as literate. And we generally succeed, I think.

But our work is flawed. Flawed because many of our students resist it—some wrongly, I think, but many rightly. Our work serves a small, college-bound audience and is a wonderful way of using twelve years of school to select students for advanced placement in English. But, most of all, our work deals with a medium—print—that is losing ground and neglecting the major change wrought in our literary and artistic world thanks to the genius of Thomas Edison, who was as great an influence on literacy as Johannes Gutenberg.

You may have noticed that earlier I put reading together with viewing. We make a grave mistake if we see literature only as print; it has been only print for a brief period, two hundred years. For our students, and to a great extent for us, literature is a multimedia affair; this fact is at the heart of our personal and collective canon. All media should be at the heart of our literature classes. There is no reason why students should read Shakespeare; he wrote not to be read but to be performed in a noisy amphitheater with no scenery and few seats for the audience. There is no reason why students should not deal with film, video, audio, hypermedia, and other forms of presentation.

The task is the same. Take another example, a comic by Bill Watterson (see page 216).

Students might begin by laughing and talking about why they found it funny. Some might ask whether Hobbes is real or not, and some might not know who John Calvin and Thomas Hobbes were.

Students might also begin by saying that the strip is simple, that there is nothing to it. There are many pedagogical techniques teachers can use to get students to talk about pictures and text. There might be a discussion of the direction in which each person is looking, of what happens between frames and how the frames are connected and separated, of how several speeches occur in the one long frame, and of whose eyes are open and whose are closed and how that relates to the dialogue. Reference might be made to many poems having different views on people and fate, views that Watterson seems to question.

*John Calvin and Thomas Hobbes: John Calvin (1509–1564) was a French theologian whose ideas about the supremacy of the Bible and a rigid moral code underlie Presbyterianism and other reformed Protestant denominations. Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) was an English philosopher whose materialism was at odds with the idealist thought of his day. In the Bill Watterson cartoon series, Calvin is a highly precocious six-year-old and Hobbes is Calvin’s tiger, a playmate and companion for Calvin but a stuffed toy for everyone else.*
Comparisons might be made with Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man,* from which the initial premise is taken, and with Greek tragedy (the pride of individuals, dramatic irony). There might be relations between the Watterson strip and various dramatic shows on television.

The point of the talk is to get students to come to an interpretation of the strip. To this end, we could ask the following questions: What is Watterson saying? How is one supposed to respond to this strip? How is the strip organized? What words or images stand out? Do image and picture work together or are they at odds with each other? How is one to think of Hobbes, who pushes the wagon and yet seems to object to the whole enterprise? What does the strip say about people or life or your life or your environment? Is it well written? How does the artist get you to respond? How is Watterson like Charles Schulz and Walt Disney and other cartoonists who use children and animals? As students talk, the focus should remain on the text and pictures and on the spaces between words in the text. The students may then go on to film, to literature, or even to a Web site on comics and comic artists. The discussion takes a similar shape as it is started again.

In case you haven't noticed, the language I use here is exactly the same as the language I used in talking about the Kumin poem; I only filled the slots somewhat differently. The point is that the texts and the canon that many of our students have acquired are texts and canons built on images. Images, although they have a distinct visual character and set of principles, are used in ways similar to the ways in which words are used. There is the medium; there is form; there are a variety of artistic purposes and methods; there are genres and conventions, traditions, and a canon not just of written words but also of images. Like our students, we have a stockpile of images ranging from the works of people like Watterson, Schulz, Stan Lee, Orson Welles, John Ford, Dorothea Lange, and the Beatles to the assassination of Kennedy, the Challenger disaster, the atrocities of Bosnia, and Woodstock. These images are as much a part of our canon as Shakespeare, Keats, and George Eliot are.

Images are the proper province of the English teacher, and although the goal and means of disciplined reflective and refractive talk remain as important as they were a thousand years ago, the object of what is discussed has changed and should change. Literature teachers brought in short stories and novels only a hundred years ago; you'd think we had been teaching nothing else. Now we must bring the newer media—not to change the talk but to broaden the focus of our activities and to bring ourselves to an understanding of the world inhabited by our students as well as by ourselves. If we don't do this, if we remain as antagonistic to the media as people like Neil Postman would have us be, we will lose our true end of helping students be disciplined in

*Essay on Man: a possible reference to Alexander Pope's lines, "O blindness to the future, kindly gives, That each may fill the circle marked by Heaven."* (Essay on Man 184–85). Watterson may also have been referring to Thomas Gray's "where ignorance is bliss, 'Tis folly to be wise." ("Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College" 99–100).

*Charles Schulz: the author of the Peanuts comic strip.*

*Stan Lee: the cartoonist who created Spiderman.*

reflective and refractive human beings. That practice will be lost for all but a very small number indeed. I think this would be a great loss, for it seems to me that we would then be giving in to the forces of materialism, instant gratification, and narcissism—surrendering to the culture of the mall and the huckster.

WORK CITED

JOHN GUILLORY

John Guillory was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, and was educated there until 1974, when he graduated with a B.A. from Tulane University. In the same year he entered graduate school at Yale University, where he received his Ph.D. in 1979. He taught at Yale until 1989 and since then has been a professor at Johns Hopkins University. His first book, *Poetic Authority: Spenser, Milton, and Literary History*, was published by Columbia University Press in 1983. He has since published essays on Milton concerning issues of gender, Protestant vocation, and the relationship between theology and science. His second book, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, was published by University of Chicago Press in 1993 and won the René Wellek Prize of the American Comparative Literature Association. Guillory is currently studying the relationship between the development of literary study in the modern university and the development of a professional-managerial class. Guillory’s work may be described broadly as an attempt to understand the history and future of literary study in the context of the emergence of the modern constellation of disciplines. The following selection is from Cultural Capital.

The Canon as Cultural Capital

Every relationship of “hegemony” is an educational relationship.
—Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*

While the debate over the canon concerns what texts should be taught in the schools, what remains invisible within this debate—too large to be seen at all—is the school itself. The absence of reflection on the school as an institution is the condition for the most deluded assumption of the debate, that the school is the vehicle of transmission for something like a national culture. What is transmitted by the school is, to be sure, a kind of culture; but it is the culture of the school. School culture does not unify the nation culturally so much as it projects out of a curriculum of artifact-based knowledge an imaginary cultural unity never actually coincident with the culture of the nation-state. In this way the left hand of the educational system—the dissemination of a supposedly national culture—remains ignorant of what the right hand is doing—the differential tracking of students according to class or the possession of cultural capital. If the structure of the system, its multiple levels and its division between public and private institutions, divides the population in this way, the culture the university produces (as opposed to other kinds or levels of school), can only be “national” for that plurality which acquires this level of education. What this group may learn to think of as a national culture is always a specific relation to the knowledge defined by the university curriculum.

The extraordinary effects of confusing school culture with national culture are most conspicuous when the national culture is made to swallow whole the even larger fish called “Western culture,” and in such a way as to produce an image of the American nation as the telos of Western cultural evolution. Here we may adduce William Bennett’s complacent version of this narrative in “To Reclaim a Legacy”:

We are a part and a product of Western civilization. That our society was founded upon such principles as justice, liberty, government with the consent of the governed, and equality under the law is the result of ideas descended directly from great epochs of Western civilization—Enlightenment England and France, Renaissance Florence, and Periclean Athens. These ideas, so revolutionary in their times yet so taken for granted now, are the glue that binds together our pluralistic nation. The fact that we as Americans—whether black or white, Asian or Hispanic, rich or poor—share these beliefs aligns us with other cultures of the Western tradition.

The interesting point about this argument is not the typically American chauvinism Bennett immediately denies (“It is not ethnocentric or chauvinistic to acknowledge this”), or the dubious assimilation of Western thinkers to democratic political principles many or even most of them would not in fact have endorsed. What remains interesting and consequential in Bennett’s statement is a confusion which, as we shall see, characterizes both Bennett and his opponents in the canon debate: the slippage between *culture* and *civilization*. The semantic burden of the latter term obliquely recognizes what the concept of the national culture denies—the necessity of defining that culture largely by reference to the High Cultural artifacts to which access is provided in the schools. Bennett admits as much, without drawing any adverse conclusion from this point; “No student of our civilization should be denied access to the best that tradition has to offer.” Is “our civilization,” then, the same as “our culture”? One may reasonably question what necessary cultural relation a university-trained suburban manager or technocrat has to Plato or Homer by virtue of his or her American citizenship—no more, in fact, than an educationally disadvantaged dweller in the most impoverished urban ghetto. The suburban technocrat and the ghetto dweller on the other hand have very much more in

*William Bennett: Secretary of Education in the Reagan administration.*

“hegemony”: In the Marxist theories of Antonio Gramsci, hegemony is a form of cultural power expressed through a lived system of meanings and values.
common culturally with each other than either of them ever need have with the great writers of Western civilization. If "Western" civilization—defined by a collection of cultural artifacts—can imaginarily displace the real cultural continuities that obtain at the national level, such an exemplification of the social imaginary is the effect of a crucial ambiguity in the concept of culture itself, an ambiguity familiar enough in the history of the concept as the distinction between culture in the sense of refinement—in this case, familiarity with the great works of "civilization"—and in the ethnographic sense of common beliefs, behaviors, attitudes—what a "national culture" would really have to mean. The attempt to make the first sense of culture stand for the second names a certain project for the university, but one which it seems less well suited to undertake than ever (for reasons I will consider presently). The apparent failure of the university's cultural project of constituting a national-culture elicits from the New Right the clamorous demand for a return to what was after all the bourgeois school, the institution enabling the old bourgeoisie to identify itself culturally by acquiring the cultural capital formerly restricted to the aristocratic or clerical estates. This capital consisted of nothing other than the "great works" of Western civilization.

If the national cultural project of the school is no longer a real possibility (it was always a class project anyway), the canon debate has nevertheless decisively problematized the notion of culture in its controversial language. The essence, however, of any concept of a specific school culture in the debate has meant that the perceived monolith of Western culture has had to be contested by the assertion of an antithetical "multiculturalism" as the basis of a politically progressive curriculum. Multiculturalism defines Western culture as its political antagonist, and vice versa. Yet the rather too neat polarization of these terms elicits the question of what school culture really is, that is, what relation to culture is produced by the formal study of cultural artifacts. Whatever other effects the introduction of multicultural curricula may have, the theory of multiculturalism perpetuates the confusion of culture as the study of preserved artifacts with the sense of culture as common beliefs, behaviors, attitudes. It is by no means the case that the study of cultural works simply operates as the agency of cultural transmission in the second sense—although school culture, as Bourdieu has shown, does its part to install a class habitus on the subjects of its pedagogy. This habitus is defined not by the content of cultural works (Plato is not really part of "our culture"), but by the relation to culture insculpted by the school, the relation named precisely by Bennett's "legacy"—a relation of ownership. It is not the ideas expressed in the great works that account for their status in arguments such as Bennett's, but the fact that these works are appropriated as the cultural capital of a dominant fraction. That appropriation is in turn justified by representing the ideational content of the great works as an expression of the same ideas which are realized in the current social order, with its current distribution of cultural goods.

In order to accomplish the cultural task of appropriation, however, the school must traverse the heavily mined terrain of a certain alienation produced by the formal study of cultural works. We should not forget that the effects of this alienation are sometimes permanent, and that it is precisely "one's own" culture which sometimes fails to survive the culture of the school (that is to say, the school sometimes produces, despite its acculturative function, dissident intellectuals). Similarly the formal study of cultural works produced within minority cultures is not a means of reproducing minority culture (in the ethnographic sense). If the formal study of Latin-American novels in the university does not really transmit or reproduce Latino culture, it follows that the relation of even Latino students to these artifacts will not be entirely unlike the relation of "American" students to the works of "Western" (American or European) culture. The question is what this relation is, or what it should be.

One conclusion to be drawn immediately from this argument is that there is no ground of commensuration between Western cultural artifacts on the one hand, if examples of these are the Odyssey or the Parthenon; and Latino culture on the other, if the latter means the totality of a living culture, and not just its artifacts. Insofar as it is only the works of Western or Latino culture to which one has direct access in the school, these works will ultimately be constructed and legitimated as objects of study in the same way, by a process of deracination from the actual cultural circumstances of their production and consumption. If works by Afro-American, Latin-American, or postcolonial writers are read now in formal programs of university study, this fact may be the immediate result of a political project of inclusion, or the affirmation of cultural diversity. But the survival of these works in future school curricula will be seen otherwise, as a consequence of their status as interesting and important cultural works that no intellectually responsible program of study can ignore. The current project of affirming cultures themselves through the legitimation of cultural works in university curricula is enabled by the very confusion between the senses of culture to which I have drawn attention. The very intensity of our "symbolic struggle" reduces cultural conditions of extreme complexity to an allegorical conflict between a Western cultural Goliath and its Davidic multicultural antioxidants. Hence it is never really Greek culture, or French culture, or Roman culture, that is compared with Latino culture or Afro-American culture, but always "Western" culture. Multiculturalism finds itself in the position of having to credit both the reality and the homogeneity of that fictional cultural entity, which achieves its spurious self-identity only by consisting of nothing but cultural artifacts.

If the fiction of the cultural homogeneity of the West is nevertheless a very powerful one (because it is ideological), perhaps the better strategy for resisting its domination-effect may be to expose the relation between the "culture" it pretends to embody and the institution which is its support in reality. It is just by suppressing culture in the ethnographic sense—or reserving that sense of culture for non-Western artifacts—that the traditional curriculum can appropriate the "great works" of Western civilization for the purpose of constituting an imaginary unity such as Bennett or Hirsch envisions. The deracination of the text tradition thus forces us to define the intertextual relation, say, between Aquinas and Aristotle as evidence of the continuity of Western culture, but it allows us to set aside the fact that Aristotle and Aquinas have almost nothing in common culturally. It should be remarked that...
are also that the construction of Western culture depends more upon a body of philosophical than literary texts. If the canon debate originated in university literature departments, the defenders of the canon extended the debate to the question of the humanities curriculum as a whole—the "core" curriculum—by resurrecting the philosophical text tradition as the basis for that core curriculum. This text tradition can be invoked more easily than national vernacular literatures to maintain the fiction of a profound evolution or destiny of Western thought extending from the pre-Socratics to the present. Yet the fact remains that this continuity was always the historical support for nationalist gendras. The schools in the early modern nation-states provided an instrument of means by which the state could dissolve the residually feudal bonds of local sovereignty and reassert personal loyalty to itself. Nationalism is, as we have seen, entirely on the surface in Bennett's account. In the early modern period, the great vernacular literary works of the nation-states were taught in such a way as to constitute retroactively a pre-national "West" (usually classical rather than medieval), a continuity intended to cover over the traumatic real of early modern societies with traditional feudal cultures. The "West" was always the creation of nationalism, and that is why one observes that the assertion of the continuity of Western tradition exactly corresponds in its intensity to the assertion of nationalism itself.

The homogenizing textual effects of deracination are even more obvious when we consider the fact that, for us, Plato and Aristotle, Virgil and Dante, are great works of literature in English. The translation of the "classics" into nce's own vernacular is a powerful institutional buttress of imaginary cultural antinomies; it confirms the nationalist agenda by permitting the easy appropriation of texts in foreign languages. Yet the device of translation should not be regarded as extraordinary or atypical of school culture, for translation is nly a more explicit version of the same technique of deracination by which all cultural works are constructed as objects of study. This point may clarify the otherwise confusing status of "oral literature," which has become a favored trope for the contestation of Western culture's hegemony. It is not a mere contingency that oral works must become "written" in order to be brought into the arena of curricular conflict as "noncanonical" works, excluded or devalued by Western text tradition. In fact, oral works cannot otherwise enter the institutional field, since orality as a cultural condition can only be studied at all diagnostically, as the "writing of culture." When the condition of oral production is on the other hand ignored in the context of interpreting or evaluating these works (by treating oral works as though they were otherwise written "orks), the real difference between school culture and the culture which gives se to works disappears from view. By suppressing the context of a cultural "orks' production and consumption, the school produces the illusion that our culture (or the culture of the "other") is transmitted simply by contact with the works themselves. But a text tradition is not sufficient in itself either to constitute or to transmit a culture, and thus school culture can never be more than a part of a total process of acculturation which, for societies with schools, is always complex and has many other institutional sites.

The function imposed upon schools of acculturating students in "our" culture often thus requires that texts be read "out of context," as signs of cultural antinomy, or cultural unity. We need not deny that the text tradition can sustain intertextual dialogue over centuries and millennia, however, in order to insist that what is revealed by the historical context of this dialogue is cultural discontinuity and heterogeneity. A rather different pedagogy, one that emphasizes historical contextualization, would at the very least inhibit the assimilation of cultural works to the agenda of constituting a national culture, or the Western culture which is its ideological support. For the very same reason, only the simplest cultural pedagogy can make the works of the multicultural curriculum stand in a "subversive" relation to Western culture. The historicization of these works too will have to confront the mutual influence and interrelation between dominant Western and dominated non-Western cultures (in the case of postcolonial works, for example, the fact that "Western culture" appears as a cultural unity only through the lens of the colonial educational system, and that postcolonial literatures are in constant dialogue with the works taught in that system). While there exists a multiplicity of sites of cultural production, then, this multiplicity can never really be equated with the multiplicity of cultures, as though every cultural work were only the organic expression of a discrete and autonomous culture. The fact that we now expect the curriculum to reflect as a principle of its organization the very distinctness of cultures, Western or non-Western, canonical or noncanonical, points to a certain consistent error of culturalist politics, its elision of the difference the school itself makes in the supposed transmission of culture.

NOTES

1. Bourdieu makes this point in his essay "Systems of Education and Systems of Thought," International Social Science Journal 49 (1977), 349: "An individual's contact with his culture depends basically on the circumstances in which he has acquired it, among other things because the act whereby culture is communicated is, as such, the exemplary expression of a certain type of relation to the culture.


3. See the entry for "culture" in Raymond Williams's Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, 1983), 67–53, for a lucid account of what is at stake in the different meanings of "culture" historically. We might sum up the difference between our national culture and our school culture by acknowledging that for national culture "Nike" is the name of an athletic shoe, for school culture a Greek goddess.

4. Bourdieu, "Systems of Education and Systems of Thought," 351, points to an analogous confusion when the concept of culture is made to refer indifferently both to popular culture and to school culture: "Just as Basil Bernstein contrasts the 'public language' of the working classes, employing descriptive rather than analytical concepts, with a more complex 'formal language,' more conducive to verbal elaboration and abstract thought, we might contrast an academic culture, confined to those who have been long subjected to the disciplines of the school, with a 'popular' culture, peculiar to those who have been excluded from it, were it not that, by using the same concept of culture in both cases, we should be in danger of concealing that these two systems of patterns of perception, language, thought, action and appreciation are separated by an essential difference. This is that only the system of patterns cultivated by the school, i.e. academic culture (in the subjective sense of personal cultivation or Bildung in German), is organized primarily by reference to a system of works embodying that culture, by which it is both supported and expressed.

5. This argument should not be taken to deny the fact that the "West" is a real politico-economic entity, even though its cultural homogeneity lies far behind the unity of its politico-economic system. The image of that cultural unity remains the ideological support for the real unity of the West in its imperial relations with the Third World, or in its militarist competition with what was formerly the Eastern Bloc. The collapse of the Soviet Union as a result of that competition, and the consolidation of a Western alliance in the Persian Gulf War is sufficient evidence of what was and is at stake in maintaining the fiction of the cultural
nunity of the West. Finally, do we need to be reminded that it is Coca-Cola and not Plato which signifies Western culture in the realm of what Immanuel Wallerstein calls "geoculture"? On this subject, see John Tomlinson, Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

6. "This is the argument of Joan Shelley Rubin, The Making of Middlebrow Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). Discussing John Erskine’s original idea for a "great books" program at Columbia University, Rubin notes: "Thus contending that 'great books' portrayed timeless, universal human situations [Erskine] permits the conclusion that the classics of Western literature are the American heritage." (173).

7. The example of Heidegger almost goes without saying, but not quite. Heidegger’s belief in the deep affinity between the Greek and German languages, supposedly the only truly philosophical languages, forces us to recall that the text tradition which is the support of the notion of the West is itself supported in modern European thought both by philosophico-philological and existentialist concepts of continuity.

8. Bourdieu, "Systems of Education and Systems of Thought": "Because of its own inertia, the school carries along categories and patterns of thought belonging to different ages. In the observance of the rules of the dissertation in three points, for example, French schoolchildren are still contemporaries of Saint Thomas. The feeling of the 'unity of European culture' is probably due to the fact that the school brings together and recovers—as it must for the purposes of teaching—types of thought belonging to very different periods" (352). What has been called a "text tradition" is obviously the site of critical judgment, in the sense that the entire domain of intersubjectivity, or response to earlier by later writers, is a powerful agency for the preservation of these writers. Nevertheless, I have consistently argued for locating the site of canon formation in the school, for the reason implied by Bourdieu in the essay just quoted. The point of the sociological argument, for both Bourdieu and myself, is that authors learn whom to read and how to judge, and that even a judgment of recent but uncanonized work must eventually be validated in the passage of writers into school curricula in order for one to speak of canonicity. One should not forget that literary history is filled with the names of writers whose high standing with readers, more famous authors, was initially insufficient to insure their canonicity.

9. Schools do not always have to acknowledge the fact of decanonicism, nor do they necessarily have to employ historicizing strategies of recontextualization in classroom practice. Precisely to the extent that they deny the former and decline the latter, they can realize the objective of merely reproducing culture as dogma, as in the case of religious schools.

10. This point has been eloquently argued by Kwame Anthony Appiah in the context of the production and consumption of African cultural works: "If there is a lesson in the broad scheme of this circulation of cultures, it is surely that we are all already contaminated by each other, that there is no longer a fully autarchic 'ethn-African' cultural worldview at work by our artists (just as there is, of course, no American culture without African roots). And there is a clear sense in some postcolonial writing that the postulation of a unitary Africa over against a monolithic West—the binarism of Self and Other—is the last of the shibboleaths he modernizers that we must learn to live without." (Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" Critical Inquiry 17 (1991), 354).

Elegiac Conclusion

I am not presenting a "lifetime reading plan," though that phrase has now taken on an antique charm. There always will be (one hopes) incessant readers who will go on reading despite the proliferation of fresh technologies for distraction. Sometimes I try to visualize Dr. Johnson or George Eliot confronting MTV rap or experiencing Virtual Reality and find myself heartened by what I believe would be their ironical, strong refusal of such irrational entertainments. After all, I have spent in teaching literature at one of our major universities, I have some confidence that literary education will survive its current malaise.

I began my teaching career nearly forty years ago in an academic context dominated by T. S. Eliot; ideas that roused me to fury, and against which I fought as fiercely as I could. Finding myself now surrounded by professors of hip-hop, the doctrines of Gallic-Germanic theory; by ideologues of gender and of various persuasions; by multiculturalists unlimited, I realize that the Balkanization of literary studies is irreversible. All of these Resenters® of the aesthetic and literary culture are not going to go away, and they will raise up institutional barriers after them. As an aged institutional Romantic, I still decline the Eliotic nostalgia for Theocratic Ideology, but I see no reason for arguing with anyone about literary preferences. This book is not directed to academics, because only a small remnant of them still read for the

Harold Bloom

‘Harold Bloom’s theories of poetic misprision and anxiety have changed how critics think about literary tradition. Bloom was born in New York City in 1930, took his B.A. at Cornell University, and received his Ph.D. from Yale University in 1955. He has been a member of the Yale faculty since then and is presently Sterling Professor of the Humanities. Bloom’s brilliance is fabled; he possesses an erudite memory and is said to have read English before he spoke it. In 1985 he received one of the so-called genius awards from the MacArthur Foundation. His studies of Romantic poets include Shelley’s Mythmaking


*Resenters: members of the School of Resentment, Bloom’s term for critics who read canonical literature against the grain, seeking flaws of patriarchalism, racism, or homophobia. See the introduction to Part Three, page 243, for more on reading against the grain.

*Eliotic nostalgia for Theocratic Ideology: an allusion to the way T. S. Eliot viewed the canonical works as forming an ideal order like the orders of angels in Dante’s Paradise.